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ABSTRACT

Demographically, mainland Hispanic Americans constitute a population that is economically and educationally diverse. Nonetheless, a cluster of related findings indicates that Hispanic students are more poorly prepared for college than non-Hispanic White students. More Hispanic high school seniors than White non-Hispanics are enrolled in vocational or general programs than academic programs, and fewer take the standardized college admissions tests. Lack of interest in the courses offered by high schools, alienation, poor teaching, and differences in family life are among the reasons for the lesser tendency of Hispanic students to be adequately prepared for or interested in applying to college. Studies suggest that teachers' cultural stereotypes act negatively on their expectations for Hispanic students, and that language, ethnicity, and social-class factors contribute to a lower classroom experience for the Hispanic student. Because of these and other factors, some researchers have suggested that college officials look beyond high school grades and admissions test scores when considering acceptance of Hispanic students. Following the narrative, the paper concludes with a list of guidelines for use by high schools in developing strategies to better prepare the Hispanic student for college, and a list of organizations that specifically address the educational needs of Hispanics. (KH)

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Helping Hispanic Students to Complete High School and Enter College

by

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The Demographic Context

In order to appreciate the obstacles to Hispanic educational attainment, it is first necessary to understand something about the demographic context in which the education of Hispanics takes place. About 13.2 million Hispanics live on the United States mainland, and as much as another 4 million may live here as undocumented immigrants. This vast group of mainland Hispanics is educationally and economically varied and includes culturally and linguistically diverse individuals with recent or distant origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Central and South America.

The median annual income of Hispanics is about $6,000 lower than that of non-Hispanic White Americans (14). One in four Hispanics lives under the poverty level, compared with 1 in 10 non-Hispanic Whites. Similarly, 1 in every 5 Hispanic households is headed by a woman, compared with 1 in every 10 non-Hispanic White households (5).

Spanish is obviously a significant linguistic characteristic for all Hispanic students. However, contrary to common assumptions, Spanish dominance does not go hand-in-hand with either low income or academic achievement. While Cuban Americans are the most likely of all Hispanic groups to be middle class, they are also the most likely to be Spanish dominant. According to a national study of high school seniors (6), 70 percent of the Cuban-American seniors reported Spanish as the main language spoken in their homes, compared with 48 percent of the Puerto Rican seniors, 32 percent of the Mexican-American seniors, and 17 percent of the Latin-American seniors. Nevertheless, in this same group of seniors, only 22.4 percent of the Cuban Americans reported their family income as under $12,000 a year, as compared with 29.5 percent of the Mexican Americans, 22.5 percent of the Latin Americans, and nearly half of the Puerto Ricans. Cuban Americans also scored higher on standardized tests than did other Hispanic groups, and they have higher rates of college attendance.

Though mainland Hispanics constitute 6-7 percent of the U.S. population, in the 1976-77 academic year they earned only 4.1 percent of all Associate's degrees from community colleges and 2 percent or less of all Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. degrees (1). What makes these statistics a source of particular concern is the significant—and increasing—loss of educational attainment among Hispanics before high school completion (a 41 percent dropout rate in 1975 that increased to 45 percent in 1980, compared with a 35 percent dropout rate that decreased to 25 percent for Blacks, and an 18 percent dropout rate that remained constant for Whites during the same period (7). Moreover, a decreasing percentage of Hispanic high school graduates (30 percent in 1980 compared with 35 percent in 1975) were enrolled in college (7), and Hispanic students have a much higher tendency than non-Hispanic Whites to receive terminal Associate's degrees (42 percent of all Hispanics in higher education in 1980 were in two-year colleges, compared with only 23 percent of non-Hispanic Whites). Moreover, most likely because of economic constraints, Hispanic students showed a 10 percent lower full-time college attendance rate than non-Hispanic Whites, and "financial difficulties" were cited more often by Hispanic than other White students as a major reason for withdrawing from college (1).

High School Preparation for College

A cluster of related findings indicates that Hispanic students are more poorly prepared for college than non-Hispanic White students (14). First, a higher percentage of Hispanic seniors are in vocational or general programs than academic programs. Second, fewer Hispanic seniors than other Whites have enrolled in such academic courses as trigonometry, calculus, physics, chemistry, or 3 years of English. Third, a higher percentage of Hispanics than non-Hispanic Whites take neither the SAT nor the ACT, the standardized tests usually necessary for college admission. In a study of those students who did take the standardized tests (3), lower percentages of Mexican Americans (66 percent) and Puerto Ricans (65 percent) than other Whites (80 percent) identified themselves as being involved in academic or college preparatory programs. These statistics show that there are Mexican-American and Puerto Rican students who consider themselves college bound but who have not made the appropriate preparations.

An analysis of Hispanic and non-Hispanic White students' beliefs about what interferes with high school work (1) shows a number of interesting similarities and differences. Both groups of high school seniors agreed, more or less, that the following factors inhibited their school work:

> School doesn't offer courses I want to take . . . . I don't feel part of the school . . . poor teaching . . . poor study habits . . . I find it hard to adjust to the school routine . . . . my job takes too much time (4, p. 42).

On the other hand, these factors obstructing school work were cited 5-10 percent more frequently by Hispanic seniors than by non-Hispanic White seniors:

> Courses are too hard . . . . teachers don't help me enough . . . . my own health . . . transportation to school is difficult (4, p. 43).

Finally, the greatest discrepancy between Hispanic and non-Hispanic White seniors had to do with the characteristics of the students' family lives and of the compatibility of home life with school learning activities. The following factors obstructing school work were cited by more than one-third of Hispanic seniors at a level at least 10 percent higher than for non-Hispanic Whites:

> Worry over money problems (repayment of loan, support of dependents, family income, inc.) . . . family obligations (other than money problems) . . . lack of a good place to study at home . . . parents aren't interested in my education (4, p. 43).

Students' Sociocultural Characteristics and Encouragement by School Personnel

Whether they are true or not, cultural stereotypes about Hispanic students that are believed by teachers have a negative effect on their expectations, leading them to see lower potential and expect lower performance (2). In a study of Mexican-American students (10),

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teachers were more likely to show disapproval toward Spanish-dominant than English-dominant students and to attribute negative characteristics to students who spoke accented or nonstandard English or nonstandard Spanish. Another study (12) found that teachers attributed such negative characteristics as low social status, low educational attainment, and low intelligence to Hispanic students who had accents or who were nonstandard speakers. (It is likely that the social class of the students in these studies aggravated or mitigated the teachers' perceptions of the effects of nonstandard language use.)

A U.S. Commission on Civil Rights study (13) comparing teachers' communication patterns with Mexican-American and Anglo elementary and secondary school students showed that teachers directed praise or encouragement at the Anglo students 36 percent more often than at the Mexican-American students; built on the spoken contributions of Anglo students 40 percent more often; and asked Anglo students 20 percent more questions than they asked Mexican-American students. The results of these studies that weave together language, ethnicity, and social class factors suggest that teachers' negative attitudes and low expectations all contribute to a lower quality classroom experience for the Hispanic student.

The Predictive Value of Hispanic High School Grades and College Admissions Test Scores

A variety of data show Hispanic college candidates' SAT and ACT test scores as ranging from one-half to one standard deviation below the scores of non-Hispanic Whites (5). Hispanic students who describe their dominant language as English score significantly higher than those who consider Spanish their dominant language.

Insofar as admissions test scores of Hispanics are valid indicators of students' college aptitudes, one can assume that these students are not as academically prepared for college work. However, a number of factors clearly depress the test performance of these students. First, is the lower socioeconomic and educational level of Hispanic families, which has been shown to correlate with low test performance, regardless of ethnicity. Second are problems that occur within the testing situation: for example, the social or psychological perspective of a different culture which hinders guessing or interpretation; test anxiety; a relatively slower speed of test taking that decreases chances of test completion; unfamiliarity with the accepted nuance of test vocabulary; and, possibly, culturally different test-taking strategies.

After reviewing a number of studies of the predictive validity of both high school grades and college admissions test scores for Hispanic students, Duran concludes that

> Neither high school grades nor admissions test scores alone or in combination ought to bear the sole burden of evidence for making decisions to admit Hispanic-background students to college. . . . Admissions personnel need to be provided with a broader range of information on Hispanics' background, language, and culture in weighing admissions decisions (4, p. 105).

Successful Guidance for Hispanic College-Bound Students

According to a recent study, Hispanic students rely less on their guidance counselors and parents for career information than do other groups of students, and instead resort more frequently to books, magazines, and former students, as well as classroom teachers, librarians, and career specialists (8).

The task of guiding Hispanic youth toward and into college should not rest solely with counselors; principals and teachers—those who have the most contact with the students—must also participate. Hispanics are likely to be more vulnerable to both the positive and negative influences of school personnel than are middle-class, non-Hispanic White youth. School staff can be particularly influential in the college-making decisions of these youth, who may not find sufficient knowledge and support in their homes and community. The literature suggests that all school personnel should recognize the importance of bringing in the family and community (11).

Though research on counseling Hispanics is scarce, existing research indicates that what counselors *do not do* is just as significant as what they do. In interviews, Puerto Rican students cited counselors' lack of sensitivity and encouragement as influential in their decisions to drop out of school. These same students also indicated that counselors' failure to adequately explain the college-going process prevented them from applying (9).

The few studies that show positive outcomes in the counseling of Hispanics stress the importance of understanding the specific cultural background of the student. Issues such as cognitive style; family, community, and ethnic group identification; style of relating; and religious ideology may all come into play in understanding all Hispanics. But there are also social class and gender differences in perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that occur within each of the several Hispanic subgroups. Parental teaching styles, for example, have more to do with a student's economic background than ethnicity. Hispanic women, more than men, seem concerned with personal adjustment, family finance, and their own educational future. Finally, there are situations in which *any* student—Hispanic or otherwise—will experience uncertainty, insecurity, inadequacy, or apprehension, and counselors should not seek ethnic roots where the stress is universal. High schools that are successful in getting Hispanics into college combine a number of strategies.

- *High expectations and a strong academic curriculum* challenge both teachers and students and have far-reaching effects. Low expectations result in a watered-down curriculum.
- *Early Identification* of college-bound students enhances chances for better preparation. But early identification should not be rigid, should avoid tracking, and the selection of college-bound students should not be left entirely to school personnel, or be based entirely on test scores and grades. Given a proper explanation of the expectations and responsibilities, students should be allowed to enter the college process at any point in their high school careers.
- *A well-developed information system* is especially important in schools where Hispanics have not traditionally been a part of the college-bound program. Students need to be alerted about visits from college recruiters, test deadlines, college days/nights, college fairs, college orientation days, scholarship deadlines, etc. Teachers need to be attuned to these activities in order to plan lessons accordingly and to provide assistance whenever necessary. Parents need to be aware in order to provide a role of support and encouragement. And counselors need to be sensitive to the community's language preference—and to accept that some information may need to be disseminated in both Spanish and English.
- *An organized effort to prepare students for standardized testing, college admission, and financial aid application* is essential. Students need not only information on deadlines, visits, etc., but an understanding of their importance to getting into college. Activities should be designed to help students successfully complete each step.
- *A well-defined role for resource groups, including parents, teachers, college recruiters, ex-students, and community organizations* should be creatively designed to fit the needs of the individual school.

In addition to the resources that are useful to any high school student, the following list of organizations specifically address the educational needs of Hispanics.

LULAC National Educational Service Centers (LNESC). Initiated by the LULAC community of San Francisco in 1973, LNESC is a community-based multi-service educational organization that supports a variety of programs ranging from talent recognition to talent development. There are 12 field centers across the country, each designed to provide students with college and career counseling, job training, and financial aid assistance. The national office,

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located in Washington, D.C., coordinates the LULAC National Scholarship Fund (LNSF). The address of the national office is LNESC National Headquarters, 400 First St., N.W., Suite 716, Washington, D.C. 20001. Telephone (202) 347-1652. Field Center Locations are in Pomona/East Los Angeles and San Francisco (CA), Colorado Springs (CO), New Haven (CT), Miami (FL), Chicago (IL), Topeka (KS), Albuquerque (NM), Philadelphia (PA), Corpus Christi and Houston (TX), and Seattle (WA).

Aspira of America, Inc. Since 1961 Aspira has been giving young Hispanics the moral and financial support to complete their education. Primarily oriented toward young Puerto Ricans, the six field centers offer a variety of educational services, including college counseling and financial aid assistance. The address of the national office is Aspira of America, Inc., 114 East 28th Street, New York, New York 10016. Telephone (212) 889-6101.

Field Centers (Associates of Aspira) are in Miami (FL), Chicago (IL), Newark (NJ), Bronx (NY), Philadelphia (PA), and Rio Piedras (PR).

There are numerous other Hispanic professional associations that can be of assistance to counselors. Some of these groups sponsor special activities for Hispanic youth. Others provide special scholarships for Hispanics. A partial list follows.

The American Association of Spanish Speaking Public Accountants (AASSPA) has two locations: 1010 South Flower Street, Suite 200, Los Angeles, CA 90015, and 236 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Suite 603, Washington, D.C. 20002. Telephone (213) 748-8627 in Los Angeles and (202) 546-3424 in Washington, D.C.

Association of Cuban Engineers, P.O. Box 557575, Miami, FL 33155. Telephone (305) 949-4289.

Association of Hispanic Arts, 200 East 87th Street, New York, NY 10028. Telephone (212) 369-7054.

Association of Mexican American Educators (AMAE), 1300 Middlefield Road, Redwood City, CA 94063. Telephone (415) 364-7340 or (408) 299-4016.

La Raza National Bar Association, c/o South Bay Judicial District, Torrance, CA 90503. Telephone (212) 320-6010.

Mexican American Engineering Society (MAES), P.O. Box 41, Placentia, CA 92670. Telephone (212) 864-6011, Ext. 3523.

National Association of Hispanic Nurses (NAHN), 12044 7th Avenue, N.W., Seattle, WA 98177. Telephone (206) 367-0862 or (206) 543-9455.

National Association of Psychologists for La Raza, 1333 Iris, Boulder, CO 80302. Telephone (303) 443-8500.

National Coalition of Hispanic Mental Health and Human Services Organizations (COSSMHO), 1015 15th Street, N.W., Suite 402, Washington, D.C. 20005. Telephone (202) 638-0505.

Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS), P.O. Box 3831, Albuquerque, NM 87190. Telephone (505) 884-5259.

Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), P.O. Box 48, Los Angeles, CA 90053. Telephone (213) 648-1023.

Society of Spanish Engineers, Planners and Architects (SSEPA). P.O. Box 75, Church Street Station, New York, NY 10017. Telephone (212) 292-0970.

Texas Alliance for Minorities in Engineering, Inc. (TAME), c/o Dean of Engineering, University of Texas at Arlington, TX. Telephone (817) 273-2571.

Hispanic organizational efforts have continued to increase during the past decade. Counselors are urged to go beyond this list and seek out other community organizations and associations. Organizations such as the Latino Institute in Chicago, (IL), the National Council of La Raza, Project SER, Inc., and the American G.I. Forum may also be available to provide help on a local level. Additional information on Hispanic organizations may be found in the *Guidebook to Hispanic Organizations and Information* published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education in 1983, and *A Guide to Hispanic Organizations,* published by the Philip Morris Company in 1980 (100 Park Avenue, New York, NY).

Information in this ERIC Digest was drawn from *Hispanics' Education and Background: Predictors of College Achievement,* by Richard P. Duran (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1983, 150pp) and *The Counseling of Hispanic College-Bound High School Students,* by Gilberto Ramon (To be jointly published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY, and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, NM, in the Winter of 1984.

—Carol Ascher

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- the education of urban and minority youth, grades three through college, especially Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Asian Americans
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- ethnic discrimination
- desegregation in schools, housing and employment
- educational equity for ethnic groups and women
- the relationship between urban and minority life and school performance
- urban and minority social institutions and services.

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